COHOUSING AND THE ENVIRONMENT

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The typical American approach to buying, or (for the fortunate ones) building a house is to choose from the existing market or available land. The purchase is made and one moves into the location and tries to fit into the existing community and environment. The majority of new communities are established by developers and engineers, usually only interested in making the most money, and how to move the vehicles around, respectively. Little consideration is given to the environment (through haphazard building and street orientation), the pedestrian (forced to use the automobile) or community (usually consisting of strip malls and segregated zoning). This is the unfortunate picture across America, except for pre-automotive traditional towns and a growing movement of intentional communities called Cohousing.

Cohousing started in Denmark in the early 1970's and has spread to northern Europe, Canada and the United States. It came about in response to housing options that no longer addressed people's needs. Cohousing is a mix of traditional village concepts adapted to the contemporary lifestyle.

Each individual or family has a self-sufficient residence, but also shares common facilities and space. These common facilities may include, but are not limited to, kitchens and dining halls, playrooms, workshops, guest quarters, laundry facilities, etc. The extent of the shared facilities depends on what the community as a whole wants and can afford.

Normally a Cohousing group starts with people eager for a richer community experience, a convenient place for children to play, all within a close proximity to each private dwelling. Groups are formed any where from 3 to 20 or more families or individuals, and a planning

process is started. Where to live? How big are the individual units? What kinds of common facilities do we want? How much are we willing to spend? All of these decisions are thought out and discussed extensively prior to starting construction.

Resources of each individual or family unit are pooled to build the private dwellings as well as the common amenities. The private dwellings do not have to be all the same. They usually vary in the number of bedrooms and hence difference in square footage. This all depends on the size of the family and income. The idea, though, is that less private area is needed if more common facilities are incorporated. Does one need a guestroom if a common one is available to all residents? One might think that a separated guest quarters is even more appealing that one attached to a single residence.

How does all this fit in with environmentally responsible building? One only has to look at the differences between a single-family residence and a traditional small village. The single residence is isolated, promotes extensive use of the automobile, and is usually oriented whichever way the street is, uses up land area in great quantities (on a mass scale), and promotes mass consumerism. One has to have everything and more than the neighbor does. Sharing or even knowing ones neighbor well is rare. The traditional pre-industrial small village was compact, walkable, oriented to the topography and sun, promoted sharing and trading and had a sense of "we are all in this together".

Many environmental issues incorporated into Cohousing are up to the collective group to decide to have or not have. Each positive environmental decision can be multiplied by the number of residences in the community. Having more shared space means less land is needed by individual units. Shared amenities such as a pool or workshop means one such amenity is not needed for each household. Modest kitchens can be used in the individual units if a generous kitchen is in the "common house".

The formation of a real community atmosphere has wide ranging benefits to the environment. Parking kept at the perimeter means each unit does not need a garage, decreasing the size of the units and utilizing a pedestrian walkway between units. Social interaction can occur at the doorstep, not half way across town. The community is outside the unit; the shared common facilities promote gathering, meals, etc. that one usually has to leave the home for. Neighbors can look after each other's children, not a care group or stranger. Cars are sometimes shared, and each individual is not required to have one to exist. Community gardens are often incorporated to share the work, responsibility and the harvest. Can one family really eat 20 squash before they go bad? A shared garden solves this problem.

Individual units in Cohousing often have common walls between, preserving open space and saving energy. The units can be oriented all in a north-south direction for solar advantages on a community scale. This means that very few units would have east-west facing walls, a good environmental aspect. Collectively deciding to use active solar units, rainwater harvesting, graywater for irrigation purposes, or strawbale construction is again multiplied by the number of individual units, not just one.

An argument can be made that a Cohousing community is really greater than the sum of its parts, especially when environmentally responsible practices are incorporated. To have a lasting effect on the environment, we really need to start thinking in collective terms. One person can make a small difference. Collectively with others, we can make an impact!

Bibliography

McCamant, Kathryn and Charles Durrett. Cohousing-A Contemporary Approach to Housing Ourselves. Berkeley, Ca. Ten Speed Press. 1988.